NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1984

publicpower

PUBLIC POWER INNOVATION

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the other side

by VIC REINEMER
editor, PUBLIC POWER

A LAW SIGNIFICANT to local and state governments moved almost unnoticed from Congress to the White House in the adjournment rush. The intent of the legislation is to prepare for a fair and logical rebuilding of the nation's public facilities—hospitals, water resource projects, resource recovery facilities, wastewater treatment plants, roads, bridges, railroads, mass transportation, airports, federally assisted housing, communications and public buildings.

The basic concept of P.L. 98-501, said one of its key architects, Rep. Bob Edgar (D-Pa.), is "that our national public facilities and capital needs be inventoried annually on a consistent basis, our spending priorities weighed across a broad range of investment areas, and decisions made on a rational, nonpolitical basis with regard to funding of operation and maintenance, repair and construction of public facilities."

The word for all these public facilities, many in disrepair, is infrastructure. The legislation is variously known as the Public Works Improvement Act or the Public Capital Investment Act. Oldtimers will recognize it as the capital budget bill, through the Congress at last, albeit in a different form than earlier versions.

Both major political parties can rightly claim credit for this major step toward a coherent long-term procedure for proposing and comparing capital outlays and the means of financing them, with sufficient detail to make well-considered policy decisions. Senators Robert Taft (R-Ohio) and James E. Murray (D-Mont.) included a capital budget provision in the Senate version of the Employment Act of 1945, only to lose that section in the House. In 1949 the Hoover Commission on Government Reorganization advocated separation of budget estimates into two primary categories—current operating expenditures and capital outlays. During the '50s Democratic Senators such as Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, Wayne Morse of Oregon and Warren Magnuson of Washington advocated a capital budget, to show the value of investing public funds in development which returns revenue to federal and local governments.

John F. Kennedy endorsed the capital budget in his 1960 presidential campaign. A presidential commission in 1967 threw cold water on the idea and during the 1970s Congress concentrated on upgrading its own capacity to deal with increasing budgets. The bipartisan nature of the legislation continued in recent years as Congressman Edgar and his Republican colleague from Pennsylvania, Rep. Bill Clinger, worked closely in moving the bill forward, along with the committee leadership in the Republican Senate and Democratic House.

A council established under the legislation will analyze and report annually for three years, beginning in 1986, on the age and condition of public works facilities, methods of financing, maintenance needs and projected expenditures and policy options. The council will also develop uniform guidelines and criteria for inventory and assessment of public works. The president is to include as part of the annual budget submissions to Congress, beginning with fiscal 1986, detailed analyses of major capital investments. Military bases, posts, installations and facilities—but not weapons—will be included.

This is not legislation to add to or detract from the budget deficit. It is a tool, available to some local governments and long needed at the federal level, to grapple with domestic policy choices, and to ground these choices on firmer foundations than have been used in the past.

Correction

The paragraph from which a line was dropped in Jeff Tarbert's article, "Public Power Salaries Below Those of IOUs, Cooperatives," in the September-October issue, should have read: "More than 400 utilities participated in the 1984 (salary) survey including: 282 public power systems, 55 investor-owned utilities, 32 distribution cooperatives, 18 generation and transmission cooperatives, and 21 joint-action agencies."

Innovators Raise Questions

Questions kept popping into mind as I reviewed the summaries of hundreds of innovative public power projects and practices, beginning on page 32. How well are those shredded auto tires burning in the Lakeland, Fla., power plant? If Columbia, Mo., can dislodge fly ash with sound could someone whistle the soot out of our chimney? What other towns, besides Celina, Ohio, forego collecting an electric bill during Christmas month? Who is the person to write a PUBLIC POWER article on the increasing significance of cogeneration as a source of electric power? How many communities have, perhaps without using the phrase, a "conservation power plant," such as in Austin, Texas, and Kissimmee, Fla., where plant construction has been deferred by use of imaginative alternatives? Certainly Osage, Iowa, is one of them.

Several of the articles in this issue provide some of the answers to questions that will come to mind as you read the innovation report. We plan to have more such articles next year. Article suggestions from innovators are most welcome.

Especially interesting, I think, are the projects which show the inclination of public power systems to help solve problems larger than themselves. One example is the contribution to no-till planting equipment, by Springfield, Ill., to reduce soil erosion. Another is development of a farm to use wastewater sludge by Fort Collins, Colo.; crops from the improved land may be used in anaerobic digesters to increase methane production for the utility. A third is B.C. Hydro's injection of herbicides into young trees to ensure that the chemical enters only the tree and does not leak into the environment—an improvement over the old hack-and-squirt method. These are some of the reasons why the public comes first in public power.